DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 023 316 FL 000 178

By - Twaddell, W. Freeman

Does the Foreign-Language Teacher Have to Teach English Grammar?

Modern Language Association of America, New York, N.Y.

Pub Date May 62

Note - 6p.; Address given at General Meeting on the Foreign Language Program, Chicago, Illinois, December 29, 1961.

Journal Cit - PMLA; v77 n2 p18-22 May 1962

EDRS Price MF - $0.25 HC - $0.40

Descriptors - Educational Objectives, *English Instruction, *Grammar, Interference (Language Learning), *Language Instruction, Language Skills, Learning Theories, Linguistics, Modern Languages, *Second Language Learning, *Teacher Role

This topic is examined by posing three questions: (1) "Why should a foreign-language teacher teach grammar?" (2) "If he should teach grammar, why English grammar?" (3) "If he has to teach English grammar, why didn't his students' English teacher teach them English grammar?" The answers consider the role of the teacher in general, the instructive value of the contrasts between two grammatical systems, and the roles of and relationship between the foreign language teacher and the English teacher. (AF)

PMLA

PUBLICATIONS OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Issued Five Times a Year

VOLUME LXXVII | MAY 1962 | NUMBER 2

DOES THE FOREIGN-LANGUAGE TEACHER HAVE TO TEACH ENGLISH GRAMMAR?

W. FREEMAN TWADDELL

ED023316

FL 000 178

Published by the MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

DOES THE FOREIGN-LANGUAGE TEACHER HAVE TO TEACH ENGLISH GRAMMAR?*

By W. F. Twaddell, *Brown University*

THIS topic was formulated by Win Stone and Don Walsh, and it shows it. There are at least three questions buried—not very deeply—inside it, and there are booby-traps buried inside each of those three questions.

First: Why should a foreign-language teacher teach grammar?

Second: If he should teach grammar, why English grammar?

Third: If he has to teach English grammar, why didn't his students' English teacher teach them English grammar? These three questions are interlocked, and we may admire the Stone-Walsh rhetoric which has homogenized them through a skilful use of noun-modifiers and verb-phrase structure. Nevertheless, let us at least begin by examining the three questions in order, and with some degree of separateness.

First: Why should a foreign-language teacher teach grammar? The verb "teach" is a bit ambiguous, as legislative committees have demonstrated. From one point of view, teaching a language obviously involves teaching its grammar, since any language and any utterance in any language is inseparable from its grammar. But this interpretation, being obvious, is uninteresting and cannot be part of the Stone-Walsh program. The relevant meaning must be that of teaching overt formulated statements about the grammar—such statements as "This noun is feminine; These prepositions are followed by this case-form; Members of this part-of-speech form-class precede members of that form-class; Certain adverbs are syntactically equivalent to certain prepositional phrases; Pronoun subjects and verb-suffixes are in agreement; There are X classes of verbs with respect to the verb-suffixes in agreement with pronoun subjects, and this verb belongs to Class 3."—If this is what we are to mean by "Grammar," we can get down to our questions.

Why should a foreign-language teacher teach grammar? Precisely because he is a teacher, in a school; and it is the business of a school to formulate statements which are generalizations about many facts and experiences. Except for the young children in the early grades who are beginning to practice behavior in a foreign language, there is a demand of simple intellectual decency to formulate the grammar of the foreign-language samples which the learner is being led to incorporate into a set of linguistic habits.

Please notice the reservations implicit in that last remark. The grammatical formulation is meaningful and interesting as a statement *about* linguistic habits; it is not a useful teaching device as a *substitute* for the habits. Only an extremely sophisticated learner—somebody pretty close to an M.A. in structural linguis tics—can be safely aided in his habit-forming practice by a preliminary formulation of morphological or syntactic usages.

We agree substantially, I take it, that there is pedagogical virtue in a pre-reading period of oral-aural practice before the orthographical representation is studied. Similarly, there is virtue in a pre-grammatical learning of examples of word-formation, phrase-formation, sentence-formation—before the implicit generalizations are analyzed and formulated. But just as it is unacceptable to prolong the pre-reading oral-aural practice unduly, just so there comes a time when the habit-forming learning of grammatical utterances should be supplemented by the theory of the foreign-language grammar.

As always in the classroom, it is a question of timing. I know of no research which tells us the optimum amount of habit-forming which should precede a verbalized description of the habits. Presumably the relative amount is greatest with the youngest learners and/or those who are learning their first foreign language, smallest with the oldest learners and/or those who have already learned several foreign languages. Without the benefit of research, we will do well to defer when in doubt, and to spend our students' time in confirming and refining the habits. After all, no matter how much classroom time has gone into forming the new foreign-language habits, it is less than the time which precedes the verbalized description of physical phenomena. For example: our colleagues in the natural sciences

* An address given at the General Meeting on the Foreign Language Program in Chicago, 29 December 1961.

teach a statement about gravitation to learners who have seen many, many things fall down and have themselves fallen down many, many times before they hear the name of Isaac Newton.

However, whatever the duration of habit-forming pre-grammar learning, I venture to answer the first question with a duly qualified Yes: a foreign-language teacher has to teach grammar, because he is a school teacher. The foreign language has a grammatical structure which can be called its theory; and it is one business of school teachers to reveal theories.

As some of you know, my professional work is concerned more with language than with literature, and I concede that I may be prejudiced in favor of grammar. But I hope my more literary colleagues will grant a humanistic component in grammar as well as a scientific one, and will perhaps even grant an educational merit in a body of knowledge which is a scientific formulation of the highly human activity of language. I would find it intolerable to miss the educational opportunity implicit in even the partial bilingualism of our students—the opportunity to display the intricacy and regularity of linguistic habits as revealed in two grammars.

I hope this acceptance of overt grammatical statements as a legitimate part of a complete foreign-language course is understood as saying neither more nor less than it says: it is certainly not to be understood as endorsing grammatical theory as a substitute for habit-forming practice, nor as condoning a major expenditure of precious classroom time in talking about the language rather than in talking, reading, writing, and thinking the language. We have to see to it that teachers are trained, and that textbooks are prepared to protect the learner from the insecure teacher who finds it less strenuous to teach and test grammar than to teach and test on the language.

If we can agree on this qualified acceptance of a place for grammatical theory in foreign-language learning, we can ask the second question: "Why should the foreign-language teacher teach *English* grammar?— Both linguistic theory and classroom experience give the answer: The aspects of foreign-language grammar which are most relevant for the learner are precisely those which in some important way are in conflict with English grammatical habits.

In the domain of grammar, the conflicts between the learner's native-language grammar and that of the foreign language are of two principal types, both of which can be interestingly formulated when the learner is ready for a formulation:

(1) Differences in grammatical categories: The foreign language may have a gender system which includes all nouns, third-person pronouns, and adjectives, whereas in English the gender system involves only third-person singular pronouns and those nouns which are counterparts to proper names. Or the foreign language may lack the grammatical category of limited duration (the so-called "progressive form") which is an essential part of English verb grammar.

(2) Differences in grammatical machinery for signalling a common grammatical category: The category "object of a verb" is signalled in English through word-order, in some foreign languages through declensional markers. English uses patterns of relative stress accent to signal relations within a noun structure which Romance languages signal with prepositional constructions. The categories of mass ≠ count ("music ≠ letter") are signalled in English by complex combinations of noun-modifiers, in other languages by other types of grammatical machinery. The basic and universal categories of interrogation and negation are signalled in English by a verb-phrase grammar which is unique among the languages of the world, so far as I know.

It seems to me clear that any educable foreign-language learner past early childhood will sooner or later become curious about such differences in grammar between his native English and the foreign language. Perhaps that curiosity will be at first merely an uneasiness as he progresses in forming new grammatical patterns through practice of specimens of the foreign language. Naturally the learner has never needed to verbalize or formulate statements about the English categories or their signals, since he is what we call a Naive Expert Speaker of English. And in the initial stages of his foreign-language study he should also be kept grammatically naive precisely because he is not yet expert—he should learn meaningful utterances and constructions as meaningful but unanalyzed. After he has learned several examples which are partly similar and partly different, he is ready to be guided through variation practices to form habits of analogical behavior. And

those analogical habits constitute a grammar.

To the extent that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the categories and the signalling machinery of English and the foreign language, there is no occasion for uneasiness or curiosity. But where there is a conflict of category or machinery, the learner has a right to become overtly curious. (I would say he had a duty to become curious, in terms of the moral obligation to be intelligent.) And a fraction of class time may well be invested in a lucid grammatical formulation sandwiched in among illustrative practice.

I would hope that the formulation could be descriptive rather than prescriptive: inductive from the recently learned behavior of the learner himself as well as that of Naive Expert Speakers of the foreign language, and not a set of commands to the learner to contrive unpracticed grammatical constructions. The linguistic soundness and the pedagogical usefulness of the formulation are limited by the teacher's knowledge and skill, and by those of the textbook writer.

But there remains the question: Why *English* grammar?—Answer: Because quite clearly the foreign-language grammar is only half of the situation. It is not the foreign-language grammatical feature per se, but its difference from an English grammatical feature, that constitutes the conflict. Normally the learner will be even less able to formulate a description of his English grammatical habits than those of the foreign language, because he is equally expert and naive as a speaker of English. Without help he cannot describe his own intricate habits of grammatical word order with English adjectives and adverbs, for example. Yet such habits are the ones which are conflicting with the foreign-language grammar; and a confrontation of the two grammars is realistic pedagogy as well as respectable linguistics. For it is to be expected that about half of the time the "irregularity" or "arbitrariness" is in English grammar, not that of the foreign language.

The touchiest of the three questions is the last: If the foreign-language teacher occasionally has to teach English grammar, why didn't his students' English teacher teach them English grammar? The implied reproach fits all too familiarly into the pattern of educational buck-passing—up and down and across. I suggest that we resolutely resist the temptation to be self-righteously reproachful. Especially in this matter, where the English teacher is our near-of-kin, from whom we can get help and whom we can help. (Let us smile at the Bedouin adage: "With my brother, and death to our cousin; with my cousin, and death to the stranger"; let us not practice it.)

A little analysis of the rôles of grammatical formulation in English teaching and foreign-language teaching may be in order. I see a considerable similarity, in that practical pedagogical applications of overt grammatical statements are at the conflict points. We have already noted the kinds of conflicts which lie in the path of the learner of a foreign language, as between English grammar and a foreign-language grammar. The foreign-language teacher is trying to make his pupils more or less bilingual, and he focusses his grammatical formulation on the conflicting portions of two languages' grammars. The English teacher is trying to make his pupils bi-dialectal (in so far as he is a teacher of composition, rhetoric, the reading and writing skills, or whatever it is called nowadays); and he focusses his grammatical formulations on the conflicting portions of English grammars in at least three dimensions: written ≠ spoken, formal ≠ casual, standard ≠ sub-standard. (The three are by no means identical; indeed, there is very little overlap—a thesis I am prepared to defend elsewhere and at some other time.)

But is it not obvious that the aspects of English grammar which concern the foreign language teacher must be almost wholly different from those that are relevant to the English teacher? That which conflicts most persistently with the new foreign-language grammatical habits of our learners is the "deep grammar" of English—those features which are common to spoken *and* written, to casual *and* formal, to sub-standard *and* standard English, simply because they are all English. (Any debates as to whether they are equally "good" English, or how much "better" English one grammar is than another, may be interesting and productive, and educationally relevant. But they are debates in the domain of sociology.)

Thus the conflict points within English grammars which are relevant for the English teacher generally concern peripheral substructures of morphology, syntax, and lexicon, which are of major importance in developing bi-dialectism in the learners, but are seldom if ever at the level of depth which is involved in conflicts between English grammar and a

foreign-language grammar. For example: How many English themes written by Naive Expert Speakers of English need to be corrected because they had a definite article followed immediately by a preposition, like "the through the town?" How many displayed an attributive adjective immediately following a noun preceded by an indefinite article, like "a girl good-looking," or "some bibliographies inadequate?" How many displayed an interrogative sentence without an auxiliary verb, like "Works Mr. Walsh in Mr. Stone's shop?" or "Speaks everybody there English?"—or a negative sentence without an auxiliary verb, like "The MLA not runs a message center" or "The MLA runsn't a message center?" Of course, any teacher of English composition who encountered such non-English grammar would instantly diagnose correctly: The writer was not following a spoken, or a casual, or a sub-standard English grammar; he was displaying a conflict caused by a non-English grammar. At that moment, the English teacher either becomes a foreign-language teacher or transfers the student to an appropriate English-as-foreign-language course.

Is that, my fellow foreign-language teachers, not an adequate exculpation of our English-teaching colleagues? Let us, I urge you, cease asking them to do our work for us. The grammars they find in conflict are the intramural grammars of English—written ≠ spoken, formal ≠ casual, standard ≠ sub-standard—having little in common with our grammars-in-conflict, which are English ≠ foreign-language grammars. We are blessedly spared their intramural grammatical conflicts, at least in the early stages of our pupils' habituation to a new foreign-language grammar; we have an almost unidimensional contrast between English and foreign-language grammars. But our concern with English grammar is precisely at the deepest and most habituated level of English, which for our English-teaching colleagues can be taken as a given.

Two forays into a Utopian future are vouchsafed by the time generously put at my disposal by Stone and Walsh.

Will there be a certain terminological ceasefire with respect to English grammatical terminology? It would be silly to be optimistic, and unscientific as well; for there is at present only a beginning of the really comprehensive analysis of English deep grammar, and the explorers should not be shackled. However, there is hope that the five studies soon to emerge from the MLA's Center for Applied Linguistics will be partially coordinated in terminology, so that in the future our students can pass from one language to another with a minimum of confusion.

The other foray is more starry-eyed, and undertaken with even more diffidence: Do we foreign-language teachers expect our English colleagues to teach grammar for more than their own immediately pedagogical objectives? I.e., do we hope that some day they will expose deep English grammar? (Obviously, if they have done so before we get our potential bilinguals, our job will be much the lighter. Especially if some of the phonology of English, which is grammatically so crucial, has been included.) But is this a reasonable plea? And what are we prepared to do by way of reciprocation?

What we would be asking is that the English teacher teach Linguistics.

Very well: that would indeed be a Utopia for us foreign-language teachers. We would get pupils who could distinguish a subject from an object, a conjunction from a preposition. However, the English teachers have no pedagogical reason to teach the distinction between subject and object: the word-order grammar of English does this for all of their pupils, and there's no reason for them to spend classroom time on it. But for us foreign-language teachers, this may be of the essence. Probably our English-teaching colleagues have no trouble with indirect ≠ direct object pronouns, although we foreign-language teachers do. They may have to deal with the distinction between animate and inanimate in connection with the relative pronouns "who, which, that"; but we have more extensive difficulties with the grammar of animate ≠ inanimate.

So, if anybody is to teach deep English grammar systematically, it is not the teacher of English composition—at least not in that rôle. It would be a teacher of Linguistics using English as his corpus of grammatical categories and grammatical machinery. It may well be asked whether it is educationally sound to try to teach linguistic structure to monolinguals—whether the objective analysis of language is not most effectively learned precisely through an examination of differences between grammars. If so, which pair of grammars could best be used for comparison? English and the first foreign language? English and the second foreign language? English and Latin?—These

are questions for the statesmen who administer curricula; let us hope we will be consulted, and that we will have some of our thinking done when the time comes.

Thus one answer—one set of answers—to the question "Does the foreign language teacher have to teach English grammar?" At the risk of tiresome repetition, let me note again the reservation implicit and explicit in the affirmative answers: Learning about the grammar of a language is not a substitute for, nor a useful preliminary to, learning the language; but it is a legitimate enrichment, an illumination of patterns of linguistic behavior which have been learned.

We still have a lot to learn about grammars, English and foreign-language. As our knowledge increases, let us as foreign-language teachers make sure that we use it primarily to help our students form grammatical habits more efficiently, and secondarily to tell them about the grammatical structure of those habits.